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DEPARTMENT FOR S/CPR (JEUBANK AND CVANDERBROUK), EAP AND  
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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF FORMER PRESIDENTS BUSH  
AND CLINTON

#### SUMMARY

1. (U) President Bush and President Clinton, your visit to Phuket is eagerly anticipated by our Embassy in Bangkok, U.S. officials working on relief efforts, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (Prime Minister TOCK-SIN), and the Royal Thai Government. In Thailand, we are several weeks past the crisis stage of responding to the December 26 tsunami. We have respected the Royal Thai Government's request that the United States direct the bulk of our monetary assistance towards Indonesia and other countries more devastated or less able to cope with mitigating the impact of the tidal wave. The Thai have made it clear, however, that they welcome U.S. technical assistance. Thus, we are now working with NGOs and private companies to provide the Thai Government with that expertise. You will come to Phuket as we are winding down the critical U.S. military role in providing assistance to the tsunami-hit nations in the region by using the Thai naval base at Utapao as a regional hub. Our military has used Utapao to coordinate the largest international disaster relief effort in history. Your meeting with Prime Minister Thaksin will follow on the heels of visits to Thailand by a number of senior Americans -- then-Secretary of State Powell, Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz and PACOM Commander, Admiral Fargo, as well as several members of Congress. Your presence in Thailand will underscore our country's commitment to remain engaged in Southeast Asia and to support our treaty obligations here. In your comments with the press, we hope you have the opportunity to explain to the world that our ability to provide relief to the region by using Thailand as a hub was a direct result of decades of joint combined exercises, training, and cooperation between Thailand and the United States. At a time when some of our nation's critics question America's willingness to work with others, you can point with pride to the outpouring of assistance and relief that was provided by the U.S. Government, our NGOs, and private citizens. End Summary.

#### TSUNAMI AFTERMATH

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2. (U) The massive rescue and recovery operation undertaken by the United States as a result of the December 26 tsunami is historic. Mercifully, U.S. casualties in Thailand are much lighter than those suffered by other countries. After all victims' remains have been identified, we expect fewer than 30 American fatalities. Thousands of Thai, Europeans, and other Asians were killed in the Phuket area, a haven for vacationers during the holiday season. Total fatalities continue to rise -- the number currently is around 5,400 and Thai officials privately say they expect the final death toll to top 8,000. The Phuket/Khao Lak area was as popular a vacation spot for many northern Europeans as the Caribbean is for many Americans. During your visit, we anticipate you will fly over Khao Lak, the area with the largest loss of life in Thailand. Thousands of vacationers died in the scores of hotels that were once spread along the coast there. Locating, identifying, and processing the remains of victims of the tragedy are the key focus of U.S. efforts. The Royal Thai Government has shown the international community that it is taking careful steps to identify and preserve bodies. We anticipate you will have an opportunity to lay a wreath at an international memorial site that has been set up adjacent to the primary forensics center used by teams from over 30 countries who lost citizens in the tsunami.

3. (U) We expect you will also fly over the Royal Thai Navy's Phang Nga Naval Base. Phang Nga represents the only strategic naval facility on Thailand's west coast. Pier facilities, the water treatment plant, barracks, and communications capabilities were badly damaged by the tsunami. Additionally, a patrol boat was sunk and a frigate

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was beached by the tsunami. We have provided a technical assessment to the Thai suggesting ways to salvage the frigate. The Thai Navy has indicated, however, that it will undertake the salvage itself.

## USG RELIEF ASSISTANCE

14. (U) In the hours after the tsunami struck, the Embassy dispatched consular officers to Phuket who began locating and identifying missing or lost Americans. Several officers who assisted in this effort were actually posted to other U.S. Embassies in the region and were vacationing in the devastated area when the tsunami struck. Meanwhile, Embassy civilian and military staff linked up to provide immediate relief while we waited for the massive U.S. military assistance that arrived later. There were numerous examples of dedicated Americans working to help those in need. For instance, U.S. Navy SEALs who were in country on a previously planned mission quickly linked up with medical experts based at the Embassy from the Centers for Disease Control to work together to recover bodies (Prime Minister Thaksin was later shown on the front page of Thai newspapers thanking our SEALs). Private companies like Bechtel contacted Embassy officers to offer earth moving equipment which we were then able to load onto U.S. C-130's in Bangkok and deliver to rescue workers in Phuket. Our military officers based at the Embassy linked up with counterparts at other Embassies in Thailand to offer medical evacuation flights to their injured nationals. Embassy family members manned the American Citizens Services centers at the airports and the Embassy 24 hours a day providing medical kits, clothing and assistance to return home.

15. (U) We also worked closely with the Thai Government to secure permission to use Utapao Royal Thai Naval Air Base to support our relief efforts. Prime Minister Thaksin quickly granted the use of Utapao as a hub for relief not only for Thailand, but for the entire region. We were able to use Utapao so quickly and so effectively (as we have for past contingencies such as Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom) due to years of joint/combined training and exercises between the United States and Thailand.

16. (U) U.S. disaster relief efforts, led by the U.S. military, have had an immediate impact on affected areas. Third Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) Commander, USMC LtGen Robert Blackman, was the commanding general of Combined Support Force 536 (CSF 536), based out of Utapao and now largely returned to bases in Okinawa. CSF 536 worked closely with the Embassy to ensure that requests for assistance were promptly addressed and to assist coordination of relief from civilian agencies, NGOs and corporate donors. The Royal Thai Armed Forces granted the U.S. military blanket overflight clearances for relief operations in the region, including for aircraft from the USS Abraham Lincoln battle group which operated off Sumatra. During the height of operations, over 1,800 U.S. personnel operated out of Utapao. We flew over 1,000 sorties out of Utapao while aircraft from the USS Abraham Lincoln, Essex, and Bonhomme Richard flew thousands more to distribute tons of medicine, food, dry ice and body bags. In Thailand, USAF C-130's, working together with Thai C-130's at the airport in Bangkok were the first U.S. assets to deliver time-sensitive, visible U.S. support to the affected area. USN P-3's positioned at Utapao conducted search and rescue missions in the vicinity of Thailand and in the region. Teams made up of medical specialists from the Centers for Disease Control, the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Science and the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii were also deployed to Thailand to assist with victim identification. U.S. Navy SEALs and a representative from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance worked closely with Thai military units to search for the remains of American and other victims of the disaster. Embassy Bangkok, augmented by officers and staff from around the world, maintains a small team in Phuket to assist Americans, claim American citizen remains, and coordinate U.S. relief efforts.

17. (U) CSF 536's concept of operations set up Utapao as the hub for U.S. relief efforts bound for Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Indonesia. Combined Support Groups (CSG) were established in each of those three countries to serve as nodes to interact with the local government, the U.S. Embassies and the NGO community. CSG-Thailand was based in Phuket and redeployed on January 22. Since that time, ongoing recovery efforts in Thailand are being managed by the Embassy. A key part of those efforts is to focus civil affairs projects carried out under our military exercise authority in Thailand to assist Thais rebuilding in the devastated areas around Phuket.

## THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP AND CURRENT ISSUES

18. (U) Generally, bilateral relations with Thailand are excellent. Thailand is a security treaty ally and has been firmly supportive of the International War on Terror. American businesses have over \$20 billion in direct investment in Thailand. The United States is Thailand's largest export market and second-largest (after Japan) foreign investor. Recent decisions to remove Thailand from

the President's list of major narcotics transit or producing countries and to impose less stringent tariffs on Thai shrimp exports to the United States than we impose on Thailand's competitors were favorably received.

9. (U) Thailand sent troops to Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom and dispatched two deployments to Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In December 2003, two Thai soldiers were killed by a car bomb while on duty in Karbala. Thailand's second six-month deployment of 443 medics and engineers to Iraq ended in September 2004. Notably, despite RTG sensitivity to the prospect, participation in OIF did not cause a domestic furor in Thailand as in other countries.

10. (U) Nonetheless, there are points of friction. Human rights remain a key concern. On October 25, 2004, poorly trained military and civilian security forces in southern Thailand loaded 1,300 Thai Muslim protesters into trucks to be transported to a military base nearly three hours away. 78 of the protesters died, apparently suffocating en route. The State Department's Human Rights Report also criticized the approximately 1,300 extrajudicial killings that took place in early 2003 as part of PM Thaksin's war on drugs. In addition, Thailand's policy of constructive engagement with the military junta in Burma is at odds with the U.S. Government's policy of comprehensive sanctions against Rangoon.

11. (U) Besides dealing with the tsunami aftermath, Thaksin's biggest domestic challenge is the unsettled security situation in the southern part of the country. Southern Thailand, and in particular the three southernmost Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has experienced episodic violence since it was incorporated into the Siamese Kingdom in 1902. However, last year witnessed a dramatic increase in the level of violence, with over 500 people killed either by militants or by security forces. Local Muslim separatist militants have attacked symbols of Thai and Buddhist authority, and there continue to be almost daily incidents of violence, notably even after the tsunami disaster of December 26. Attacks most often involve

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isolated shootings of local officials, although increasingly sophisticated bombing attacks have become more common.

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH THAILAND AND THE REGION

12. (U) Prior to the tsunami, a number of analysts in the region concluded that the United States was preoccupied with other parts of the world and would likely be supplanted by others, perhaps China, as the most influential nation in Southeast Asia. Our quick, generous, and unprecedented response to the disaster has ended much of that speculation. It has quickly become evident to Thai leaders that no other country could have responded to the tsunami the way that the United States has. Our response to this tragedy has given us new opportunities to improve relations with the region. Many who questioned our extensive military exercise program with Thailand and our frequent use of Thai military facilities now understand clearly that our 50 year-old military alliance with Thailand is needed as much today as it ever was. I hope that during your visit here you can assure Thai officials and the Thai public that the United States is committed to remain engaged in the region and is determined to work closely with Thailand and other ASEAN and APEC members.

#### PRIME MINISTER THAKSIN

13. (U) We expect you will have a dinner with PM Thaksin in Phuket. In 2001, Thaksin became the first democratically elected civilian Prime Minister to win an outright majority in the Thai Parliament. His Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) political party dominates domestic politics. After the February 6 national elections, Thaksin and his party won more than 375 of the 500 seats in Parliament. This election was the first time in Thai history that a Parliamentary government filled out its entire term and was reelected. Thaksin comes from a prosperous Sino-Thai family in Thailand's second largest city, Chiangmai, and placed first in his class at the National Police Academy. He spent several years studying in the United States -- earning a master's degree in Criminal Justice from Eastern Kentucky University and a Doctorate in Criminology from Sam Houston State University. After a few years with the police, he left government service to run the family business (Shinawatra Corporation or Shin Corp), which he turned into Thailand's largest telecommunications company, making himself a multi-billionaire in the process. Thaksin characterizes himself as a "CEO Prime Minister" and is a decisive leader. Critics accuse him of staffing key government positions with family members or classmates.

#### CONCLUSION

14. (U) As in your previous visits to Thailand, you will observe first hand the true warmth and friendship that exists between our two countries. If I could suggest three main themes for your meeting with Prime Minister Thaksin and in your encounters with the press, they would be:

- Congratulate Thaksin on his election victory;
- Commend the effectiveness of the Thai response to the tsunami disaster;

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- Highlight the fact that the success of the U.S.-Thai joint effort to assist other tsunami-affected countries would not have been possible without 50 years of close military-to-military cooperation.

15. (U) We very much look forward to your visit. Have a safe journey.  
BOYCE